The Physical Activity Movement and the Definition of Physical Education

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Abstract

The purpose of this Viewpoint article is to reconsider the definition of physical education by highlighting the student learning that can and does occur by way of multiple opportunities for physical activity participation.

The Physical Activity Movement and the Definition of Physical Education

In recent years the "physical activity movement" has captured the attention of many physical education and health professionals (Young, 2014). In K-12 schools this movement emphasizes the importance of physical activity for all children and youth and recommends multiple opportunities for physical activity before, during, and after school that includes but is not limited to physical education, recess, activity clubs, intramurals, interscholastic sports, activity breaks, and so on.

A distinguishing feature of the physical activity movement in schools is the comprehensive school physical activity program (CSPAP). Under the CSPAP model, physical education teachers possess two primary responsibilities: (a) provide quality physical education and (b) serve as the school physical activity leader or champion by planning and administering multiple opportunities for physical activity throughout the school day. These two responsibilities have been labeled "physical education" and "physical activity," respectively (NASPE, n.d.).

For a brief overview, the physical education responsibility includes teaching students a structured curriculum to help them acquire the skills, knowledge, and dispositions necessary to be "wise consumers" of physical activity (NASPE, n.d.). Physical education emphasizes "education" and "learning." The physical activity responsibility includes providing opportunities for students to accumulate moderate, moderate-to-vigorous, or vigorous intensity physical activity while on school premises. While participation in physical education class can contribute to student physical activity accumulation, other opportunities for physical activity are needed to help students achieve 60 minutes or more of moderate intensity physical activity each day.

An assumption continues to persist among some physical education professionals that a focus on physical activity—rather than physical education—thwarts efforts to promote student

learning in relation to each of the national standards of physical education (e.g., skill, knowledge, physical fitness, etc.; Blankenship, 2013; Lund, 2013). Some argue too that a physical education teacher's primary responsibility should always be to teach physical education rather than to provide physical activity opportunities (Lund, 2013). At the heart of these concerns is the notion that a structured curriculum taught by a certified physical education teacher is *always* a requirement for learning.

We would like to contribute to the discussion about physical education and physical activity. At the outset, we also would like to submit that a structured physical education class taught by a certified physical education teacher is an important component necessary to facilitate student learning. However, physical education is not the only way students learn skill, knowledge, and dispositions pertaining to physical activity. We argue that learning pertaining to each of the national standards of physical education—skill, knowledge, physical fitness, character, and appreciate—is not exclusive to physical education class. The purpose of this viewpoint article is to reconsider the definition of physical education by highlighting the learning that can and does occur for students by way of multiple opportunities for physical activity participation.

This article will progress by way of the following two sections. First, we outline a philosophical position of skill learning to emphasize "how" students learn skill and why acceptance of the physical activity movement can contribute to student skill learning. Similar arguments for each of the other national standards could be made, but due to space limitations we have chosen to focus on skill. Our reason for doing so is simple. Skill competency is an integral component of becoming physically educated or physically literate (SHAPE America, 2014; Whitehead, 2010). Without skill a student is unlikely to acquire the confidence and

motivation to be physically active. While all of the national standards of physical education are important, many physical education teachers would forfeit some learning or growth in one or more areas to promote better skill learning (Arnold, 1991; Kretchmar, 2005; Lund, 2013).

In the second section, we propose another definition of physical education; a definition that highlights the learning that can and does occur for students when they have opportunities to participate in physical activity. According to this definition, "physical education" can occur when students engage in physical activity making it more synonymous with physical activity than previously recognized.

A Philosophy of Skill Learning

The purpose of this section is to outline a philosophical position that acknowledges the skill learning that can and does occur for students by way of participation in physical activity whether in formal or informal settings. Use of the term physical activity here refers to participation in aquatics, dance, exercise, games, outdoor recreation, play, and sport. The ideas of two philosophers—John Dewey and Gilbert Ryle—will be referenced to describe this philosophical position.

Much has been written about the role of experience or hands-on learning in education. Perhaps no one has addressed this topic more than John Dewey. It was Dewey who observed, "an ounce of experience is better than a ton of theory" (1916, p. 144). Dewey recognized that learning occurs best when students manipulate objects and interact with their environments. While efforts to teach theory surely have a place in education, most students demonstrate increased motivation and learning when they have opportunities to experience a subject matter firsthand. Under Dewey's perspective, experience and practice outside of a structured or formal

class setting are important components of the educational enterprise too. In this regard, there may not be a better advocate for the place of physical activity in schools than John Dewey.

Gilbert Ryle, a 20th century English philosopher, coined the term "knowing-how" as another name for skill that recognizes it as a type of knowledge. Ryle identified that the methods required to develop "know-how" are quite different than those required to develop theory-based knowledge (a type of knowledge he referred to as "knowing-that"). The primary difference in the methods relates to the opportunities student receive to engage in the task at hand. Ryle described the difference by examining how a child learns to play chess. A teacher could offer theory lessons regarding the rules and playing strategies to a would-be chess player or the would-be player could start playing chess and learn by watching the moves of others and through trial and error. To develop "know-how" or skill, Ryle emphasizes the legitimacy of the latter two methods. He observed

> A child can learn chess without every hearing or reading the rules at all. By watching the moves made by others and by noticing which of his own moves were conceded and which were rejected, he could pick up the art of playing correctly while still quite unable to propound the regulations in terms of which 'correct' and 'incorrect' are defined. We all learned the rules of hunt-the-thimble and hide-and-seek and the elementary rules of grammar and logic in this way. *We learn how by practice, schooled indeed by criticism and example, but often quite unaided by any lessons in the theory* (1949, p. 41).

Ryle's analogy to chess applies especially well to physical activity. It should be noted that the teaching referred to—"schooled indeed by criticism and example"—does not always have to come from a teacher. Such teaching can come from a peer, an older student, an adult mentor, and so on. Students can and do learn skill by way of participating in the actual activity

and/or by observing others participate without having formal lessons in the theory of the activity. Physical education teachers should never be ashamed that physical activity participation allows for learning in this more informal, action-oriented way.

From both philosophers—Dewey and Ryle—we learn that experience and practice are mandatory for acquiring skill or "know-how." While listening to a teacher explain how to perform a skill or reading a book about how to do something can be helpful, these methods alone remain grossly insufficient for promoting skill learning. Regular experience and practice performing a skill remain unmistakable prerequisites for competency.

This philosophical perspective also suggests that structured physical education lessons taught by a certified physical education teacher are not the only ways students learn skill. Skill learning occurs for many students by way of playing with their peers, observing others who possess a degree of skill competency, and perhaps most importantly by being authentically involved in physical activity without an explicit focus on "learning" physical activity. It may be that some of the best learning happens "incidentally" when both teachers and students least expect it. These are the opportunities provided by the physical activity movement that should be embraced by *all* physical education teachers because such opportunities have the potential to promote skill learning without an explicit focus on doing so. Most people we know who possess skill became skilled this way.

The only way to develop the "skill necessary to perform a variety of physical activities" is to participate in the activities on a regular basis in variety of settings (SHAPE America, 2014). Solely participating in a structured physical education class—especially due to large class sizes and limited instructional time—is unlikely to lead to substantial skill learning even when classes are taught by the best teachers. More opportunities for physical activity are better than a well-

taught physical education class alone, even if many of the opportunities are informal. Students can and do learn skills in a variety of other settings too.

A Second Definition of "Physical Education"

Closely related to this philosophical position of skill learning is the definition of physical education. The term "physical education" can be defined in two primary ways. The first definition identifies physical education as a class or series of classes included in K-12 school curricula specifically designed to guide students towards becoming physically educated. Nearly all professionals and students and the general public refer to this definition—physical education as a class—when the term "physical education" arises in everyday communications.

The second definition, which is being proposed here, identifies "physical education" not as a class but as a *process* or an *occurrence*. It is learning, growth, or development in any of the national standards with no reference to "where" or "how" this learning, growth, or development occurs. For example, when a student improves a motor or sport skill or physical fitness it is appropriate to say that "physical education" has occurred even if this learning or growth did not happen in a traditional physical education class taught by a certified physical education teacher. Physical education teachers should be more concerned that students become physically educated than about "where" or "how" it occurs. What matters is that a student experiences growth and learning in each of the national standards.

For some students, learning may be achieved more readily in a traditional physical education class taught by a certified teacher. For other students, it may happen in an after-school activity club or intramural program. For most students, however, a combination of many types of opportunities for physical activity will be needed. The message is that "physical education" can

and does occur in many ways and by way of many different types of opportunities for physical activity participation.

The first definition of physical education suggests that physical education ends when school gets out for the summer or when a student graduates. According to the second definition, however, physical education does not end with a formal class. It is an ongoing process; a lifelong journey that includes acquiring a new skill in an intramural program, enjoying a mountain biking ride with friends in an after school activity club, improving cardiorespiratory fitness during regular activity breaks, and learning about and experiencing the benefits of yoga in a structured class. These are all experiences that define "physical education." It is a continuous process that deserves and demands attention throughout life. A reasonable way to start this process is by offering students a large quantity of physical activity opportunities before, during, and after school as recommended by the physical activity movement.

Limiting the definition of physical education to a class does not do justice to the "physical education" that occurs in many other settings too. It is not possible to know exactly when or where "physical education" will happen for students. It can happen anywhere and in unexpected ways. There are many factors that influence where and when a child is likely to experience "physical education." Sometimes it happens better when a teacher is present; sometimes it does not. Teachers should remember that there can be formal teaching without learning and learning without formal teaching.

While it makes sense for the profession to continue to define physical education in a consistent way to the general public by using the first definition, it seems appropriate for physical education professionals to consider and utilize this second definition of physical education in professional dialogue and discussion. We invite professionals to remember this

second definition—that physical education is also a process or occurrence that happens in many places and in the company of many different people (i.e., friends, peers, family members, adult mentors, teachers, coaches, etc.). When we adopt this definition of physical education, it follows that providing a large quantity of physical activity experiences before, during, and after school is a legitimate way to help more students develop skill and ultimately become physically educated. More specifically, this definition challenges physical education teachers to assume greater responsibility for being physical activity leaders or champions in the school setting and to establish CSPAPs in their respective schools.

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